

Preparing Youth for Peer Pressure

Peer pressure—it's more than just a phase that young people go through. Whether it leads to pink hair or body piercing, peer pressure is a powerful reality and many adults do not realize its effects. It can be a negative force in the lives of children and adolescents, often resulting in their experimentation with tobacco, alcohol, and illegal drugs.

Parents often believe that their children do not value their opinions. In reality, studies suggest that parents have tremendous influence over their children, especially teenagers. No matter the age of their children, parents and caregivers should never feel helpless about countering the negative effects of peer pressure. Here's what parents and caregivers can do:

- **Teach young people how to refuse offers for cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.** Making children comfortable with what they can say goes a long way. For instance, shy children and adolescents might be more comfortable saying, "no thanks," or "I have to go," while those who are more outgoing might say something like, "forget it!" or "no way!" No matter what approach parents choose, it is important for them to role-play peer-pressure situations with their children.

- **Talk to young people about how to avoid undesirable situations or people who break the rules.** Children and adolescents who are not in situations where they feel pressure to do negative actions are far less likely to do them. Likewise, those who choose friends who do not smoke, drink, use drugs, steal, and lie to their parents are far less likely to do these things as well.

- **Remind children that there is strength in numbers.** When young people can anticipate stressful peer



pressure situations, it might be helpful if they bring friends for support.

- **Let young people know that it is okay to seek an adult's advice.** While it would be ideal if children sought the advice of their parents, other trusted adults can usually help them avoid most difficult situations, such as offers to smoke, drink, or use drugs.

- **Nurture strong self-esteem.** Strong self-esteem helps children and adolescents make decisions and follow them, even if their friends do not think some choices are "cool." Some ways parents can do this include being generous with praise, teaching children how to perceive themselves in positive ways, and avoiding criticism of children that takes the form of ridicule or shame.

The *Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign* is part of the Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program of the Federal Center for Mental Health Services. Parents and caregivers who wish to learn more about mental well-being in children should call 1-800-789-2647 (toll-free) or visit www.mentalhealth.org/child to download a free publications catalog (Order No. CA-0000). The Federal Center for Mental Health Services is an agency of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.